

“I Sorta Disappear...”

JOHN 12:20-33

MARCH 22, LENT 5B

See where our Lenten journey has brought us: It's all a little confusing. We talked about beer and skittles, we talked about angry Jesus, and taking up our cross, and some of the 'not-so-warm-and-fuzzy' aspects of being a Christ-follower. And then today we hear, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." It's a little confusing.

Like a Zen koan – a statement or question that defies logical thinking, pausing the rational mind just long enough for truth and realization to break through. The most famous koan is, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

In preparing today's message, reading the text and thinking all week about seeds and dying; I was reminded of a documentary – National Geographic or something like that – that I saw years ago.

Old hogs, the fisherman fondly call them -- huge salmon lumbering along the bottom of the deep green river, ever so slowly. Their noses are worn white, the narrator said, from the long trip up stream. They literally travelled hundreds, even thousands of miles to that one specific pool to spawn.

We've all heard the stories about the amazing instincts of salmon. They're driven to return to the place of their birth. After spending a year or two or three out in the ocean and swimming thousands of miles back upstream, these salmon come back to the very spot where they hatched; over rocks and dams and up waterfalls; and finally, at the end of their long and difficult journey – many don't make it -- they dig a hole, lay their eggs, and they die. And out of those eggs comes new life. For it is ONLY through dying that there is new life among salmon.

Today's story finds Jesus six days before he was going to be executed. How would you feel if you knew for sure you were going to die this coming Friday, in six days? I expect that you be a little preoccupied – I think I would be. Preoccupied, maybe a little distracted? Maybe you'd get all philosophical.... Well, in the passage for today, Jesus is philosophical about death. He is philosophizing; he is contemplating; maybe even brooding, because in only six days he knows he's going to die.

The story for today is in the city of Jerusalem. It is Passover time, and literally hundreds of thousands of people are gathered in Jerusalem. Imagine -- hundreds of thousands of people crammed into downtown Denver, jammed into 16th street mall, into Civic Center Park. Hundreds of thousands of people coming into Denver from all over. That's the way it was for Passover in Jerusalem -- with hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world crammed inside the city walls.

In this throng, this multitude, there were a couple of Greeks. They came up to the disciples and wanted to talk with Jesus. These Greek tourists came up and listened to the conversation of the disciples, and maybe they heard one disciple who had a Greek accent. Philip was from Bethsaida, which was a Greek speaking city in Judea. "That guy speaks Greek. He must be one of us."

And so they approached Philip and asked him in Greek, "Can we SEE Jesus?" That's often the question in the Bible. That is often the question in the Gospel of John, "Can we SEE Jesus?" Philip went to Andrew and the two of them went to Jesus and said: "There are two Greeks who want to SEE you."

Now, Jesus could have answered them directly, but he didn't. Jesus was distracted, so he said: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it will remain a single seed. But if it dies, it will produce many grains of wheat. For whoever will find his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will find it. If anyone would serve me, they must follow me. They must follow me in death."

Kind of a weird answer, don't you think? What is the sound of one hand clapping? All the Greeks wanted to do was to see Jesus, but Jesus was preoccupied – distracted and thinking about his death. But maybe there is a connection: That is, to see Jesus is to see the importance of dying in order to live.

You can almost see Jesus words; *"If a seed is planted into the ground and it does not die, it remains a seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds and seedlings and those seeds and their seedlings produce much fruit."* His words are so visual.

It all begins with the seed dying.

What happens to seeds when they are planted into the ground and die? After a little research I found out that inside every seed is an embryo, and in that embryo is a root which goes down into the ground, and a shoot that goes up into the sky. Every embryo has a root and a shoot; and inside that little embryo there's an "on" and "off" switch. I didn't know that -- seeds have "on/off" switches? But every seed has one. And when you plant a seed in the ground at 40 degrees for 40 days, that switch goes on, but if the temperature is at 20 degrees, the switch stays off.

Now there is also a thin coat around that seed that keeps the oxygen from coming in prematurely. So when this dormant seed is planted into the ground, for 40 days at 40 degrees, the switch goes "on" and the seed takes in water, and it begins to swell, and the seed coat is broken, and it begins to mature and produce sugar and protein; and then out comes the little

roots and the little shoots, and the shoots produce more seeds which produce more fruit. And that's what happens when a seed dies. It's a miracle.

Jesus said, "Unless a seed dies, it remains a single seed; but if it dies, it produces many seeds and then much fruit."

And so there is a parallel between the seed and the salmon. That is, in both the seed and the salmon, death is necessary for life. Dying is important for living.

I submit that this is a kind of universal law; that dying is important for living. This is a law of human psychology; it's a law of human sociology; it's a law of human relationships. It is a law of divine spirituality. It is only by first dying before we will ever begin living.

St. Francis of Assisi knew it well when he wrote his famous prayer for peace; "For it is in giving that we receive; it is in dying that we are born again."

The Apostle Paul knew it when he said: "We will not be united with Christ in a resurrection like his, unless we are first united with Christ in a death like his."

So what's it mean? All this fancy language about dying to begin living.... What does it mean to die?

In the Bible, Jesus talks about dying to self. It means dying to selfishness. It means dying to the attitude that I am going to live for me, my spouse, my kids -- the purpose of my life is self-fulfillment and experiencing all that life can give me. Me, me, me. Life is all about me and my happiness. I'm preoccupied with myself, my successes, my failures, and what other people think about me; I am the center of the universe. That's how children think; know any teenagers? It's not their fault, it's part of growing up. And many people grow older, but remain children; still believing that they are the center of their universe. They never grow up. But when my childish self-centeredness begins to die, I begin to live.

Jesus said, "Unless a seed dies, it remains only one seed; but if it dies, it produces many seeds and seedlings of little love which then grow into great love."

This childish self-centeredness of ours is a great way to think about sin. Sin is self-centered. Our selfishness -- our sins -- hurt us and those around us. It is when our sinfulness dies, that we become healthy and whole.

The best example I can think of, of course, is me -- because I'm self-centered! But I got to spend time with my mom before she died. All us kids packed up our funeral clothes and made the trip to Albuquerque to be with mom in hospice. Holding her hand and telling her how much I love her. You know, ten years earlier, I would have been unable to participate in the joy,

and the sadness, of being there with mom. I would've been drinking. My selfishness manifested itself in the disease of addiction. There would have been no living in those wonderful, terrible moments if the old Brad had not passed away.

I have heard story after story about people who have died to sin, died to sinful addictions, so that they were free to live a fruitful and loving life.

So Jesus says that it is a fundamental truth, that it is only in dying, that you begin living.

I want to share this clip with you from the movie "Billy Elliot." Billy is a boy around 11 or 12 who lives in a small town in northern England during the violent coal miners' strike of 1984. One day, instead of the boxing class his dad put him in, Billy finds himself in a ballet class where he discovers a gift and a passion for dance that his widowed, coal miner father just doesn't understand. "Lads don't do ballet!" And you wonder if his dad will ever come around.

Spoiler alert: he does. And Billy eventually gets an audition at the Royal Ballet in London and one of the adjudicators asks him a question. Watch as Billy struggles to find the words...

→ Clip -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0tTT_87Hh8

"I sorta disappear..." Salvation is like that. It's dying to self.

Frederick Buechner describes it this way:

Doing the work you're best at doing and like to do best, hearing great music, having great fun, seeing something very beautiful, weeping at somebody else's tragedy—all these experiences are related to the experience of salvation because in all of them two things happen: (1) you lose yourself, and (2) you find that you are more fully yourself than usual.

A closer analogy is the experience of love. When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give of yourself.... There should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that at last you really are yourself.

Amen.